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John Quincy Adams And The Politics Of Slavery: Selections From The Diary

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Review

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Ed. Waldstreicher, David and Ed. Mason, Matthew. *John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery: Selections from the Diary*. Oxford University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780190624613

A Path to Dissent: John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery

At the outset I want to state that I have recently completed my own study of John Quincy Adams. It is scheduled for publication this fall with the title *The Lost Founding Father: John Quincy Adams and the Transformation of American Politics*. While working on my book I spent considerable time with John Quincy's diary both the published version, Charles Francis Adams, editor, *The Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, 1795 to 1848* (12 vols.; Philadelphia 1874-77) and the much longer manuscript diary that the Massachusetts Historical Society has made available online. I am pleased to report that Professors Waldstreicher and Mason have also made use of both in preparing this volume. And with it they have performed a real service to historical scholarship.

The diary, particularly the Charles Francis Adams edition, is well known to historians. It has long been a key source for the study of American history from Jefferson's presidency to John Quincy's death in 1848. John Quincy's relationship to slavery and especially to the politics of slavery provide an excellent vantage point from which to observe and understand how slavery moved from the edge of politics in the early nineteenth century to its central role by the mid 1840s. Moreover, the diary chronicles John Quincy's depiction of his own journey from a nationalist who never supported slavery but kept his antipathy to it mostly private and subordinate to national goals to a vigorous sectionalist who by the late 1830s became the most important figure in national antislavery politics.

I have nothing but praise for *John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery*. The editors have shown discerning judgment in the material they have chosen for their pages. In a thoughtful and judicious introduction, they have spelled out the

historiographical odyssey of the diary as well as the motivation governing Adams's own relations with slavery and the South. On the latter point they deserve special commendation in a time when many tout John Quincy as an antislavery hero with little thought to the complex road he took to reach that place. In addition, I want to compliment them for recognizing the tangled connections between John Quincy and abolitionists and abolitionism. Furthermore, their comments and notes, which pervade the text, give essential context and clarification for the entries they have included.

My only regret is that this volume was not available for me to utilize in my own book. I want to add, however, that almost four decades ago I published a book with the phrase *The Politics of Slavery* in the title. I am delighted that the phrase still resonates. Closing, I gladly award the editors the accolades they merit.

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